



# **Understanding the Involvement of Veterans and Military Families in National Service**

## **Field Assessment Report**

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) currently engages more than five million Americans in service through its flagship programs of Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and the Social Innovation Fund. CNCS also leads United We Serve, President Obama’s national “Call to Service” initiative, and plays a critical role in strengthening America’s nonprofit sector and addressing the nation’s challenges through volunteer service. The 2009 Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act reauthorized CNCS and established veterans and military families (VMF) as a priority area for the agency. This was in recognition of the fact that veterans, particularly those returning home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, are a population that can benefit from and contribute to their communities through National Service (SAA Section 1101:14). The Serve America Act requires CNCS to evaluate grantees’ recent and ongoing efforts to meet the needs of VMF through National Service, and to report back to the American public and Congress on their outcomes.

In response to the SAA evaluation requirement, in 2011 CNCS awarded a contract to Westat to conduct a field assessment of its grantees who are operating VMF-oriented programs. Because the focus on VMF is relatively new, this assessment was intended to collect critical baseline data on CNCS grantees’ activities and approaches to serving the population, and to identify those programs that have demonstrated a positive impact on VMF or indicate significant potential to do so. Results from the study are intended to support the future growth of the involvement of VMF in National Service.

## Methods

The interview guide for this study was developed by Westat in close collaboration with the CNCS Project Officer and covered the following key areas of program or project operations:

- The history of these organizations’ use of National Service to meet the needs of veterans and military families,
- A summary of the service areas they are addressing,
- Organizations’ experience recruiting veterans and military family members into National Service,

- Their efforts to train civilians in military culture or veterans in National Service,
- Programs' and projects' efforts to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of their activities, and
- A description of a small sample of programs that show promise and that may merit additional exploration by CNCS.

Westat deployed seven staff members to conduct telephone interviews with the 99 organizations identified for the study sample. All staff participated in a web-based training during which they received background information on CNCS and its VMF initiatives, reviewed the interview guide, and discussed the interview process (including initial contact, scheduling, and the procedure for writing summaries of each interview). The majority of the interviews occurred between mid-July and mid-September, 2012. All but one of the organizations identified for the study completed the interview, resulting in 98 interviews and a 99 percent response rate.

## Findings

### Engaging Veterans and Military Families through National Service

Approximately half of the civilian organizations included in the study had said they had worked with veterans and military families prior to the Serve America Act. All of the RSVP programs, for example, indicated previous work with this population, but largely as a function of a cohort effect: That is, program volunteers are age 55 or older, which is a cohort that includes large veterans' populations from the Vietnam War, Korean War, and World War II. RSVP programs also tend to serve older populations, which, similarly, include veterans from America's 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts. In other cases, interviewees said they were already serving veterans because their organizations were located in close proximity to military installations. Such locations have large populations of active duty service members, but also a fair number of retired service members who contribute to the social matrix of the community. Finally, some organizations have provided services in areas of particular interest to veterans. For example, grantees who address low-income citizens' housing needs reported having engaged with veterans prior to 2009, as veterans are disproportionately represented among America's homeless population. It should be noted, however, that even among these organizations that have been serving VMF for some time, VMF generally were not singled out as a focal population until the CNCS initiative.

The remaining civilian organizations reported they have only started working with veterans since 2009. Some said this was in response to emergent needs as service members return to their communities from combat in Iraq or Afghanistan; others said the community needs have been longstanding, but, until CNCS's emphasis on veterans' services, there had been no funding mechanism to support any attempts to address the problems. The CNCS initiative, they said, provided the spark to begin to address these heretofore unmet needs.

## Services Provided to Veterans and Military Families

The Serve America Act identified nine Issue Areas that CNCS grantees should attempt to address through their programs. As a result of data analysis, Westat staff identified a tenth Issue Area through which organizations are attempting to meet the needs of this population:

1. **Services and Supports to Military Families.** Promote community-based efforts to meet the unique needs of military families while a family member is deployed and upon that family member's return home.
2. **Volunteer Opportunities for Veterans.** Recruit veterans, particularly returning veterans, into service opportunities, including opportunities that utilize their military experience.
3. **Education and Certifications.** Assist veterans in developing their educational opportunities (including opportunities for professional certification, licensure, or credentials), coordinating activities with and assisting state and local agencies administering veterans' education benefits.
4. **Employment.** Coordinate activities with and assisting entities administering veterans' programs with internships and fellowships that could lead to employment in the private and public sectors.
5. **Access to Benefits.** Promote efforts within a community to serve the needs of veterans and active duty members of the Armed Forces, including helping veterans file benefits claims and assisting Federal agencies in providing services to veterans.
6. **Military Children.** Provide mentorships to military children, including assisting veterans in developing mentoring relationships with economically disadvantaged students.
7. **Transportation.** Develop projects to assist veterans with disabilities, veterans who are unemployed, older veterans, and veterans in rural communities, including assisting veterans described in this clause with transportation.

8. **Disaster Preparedness.** Coordinate with entities in establishing the National Service Reserve Corps, through which veterans can serve in disasters and emergencies.
9. **Wellness and Other Support Services.** Assist veterans and their family members through establishing or augmenting programs that assist such persons with access to legal assistance, health care (including mental health care), employment counseling or training, education counseling or training, affordable housing, and other support services.
10. **Community Coordination.** Facilitate the coordination of care for veterans in the local community. This category was not identified specifically in the SAA, but has emerged as an important focus of several organizations

Interview findings indicate that CNCS grantees are indeed using their funds to address the SAA Issue Areas. Although not all areas have received equal levels of attention, each area is being addressed by five or more programs or projects. The area most frequently covered by grantees is Issue Area 2 (volunteer opportunities), which was reported by 62 organizations. This includes those programs or projects that recruit VMF as National Service participants, community volunteers, or both.

Issue Area 9, which covers a wide array of wellness and support services, was the second most frequently identified area. Of the 59 interviewees who said their organizations provide one of the services within this area, nearly half (27) said their focus is on housing services (e.g., shelters, home-building). AmeriCorps programs (12) and VISTA projects (12) represent the majority of organizations working in this area. Nineteen organizations – fourteen of which are RSVP grantees – provide morale-boosting services that are specific to veterans, such as friendly visiting at hospitals, grave decorating ceremonies, recognition days to honor veterans' service, and the like.

The third most common Issue Area was employment supports, which includes on-the-job training opportunities, general employment support, such as help with resume writing and interviewing skills, and hosting or referring their beneficiaries to job fairs. Of the 43 organizations that said they offer such services, 24 have AmeriCorps programs and 13 run VISTA projects. Five of the AmeriCorps programs are affiliated with one of the Conservation Corps included in this study.

In the main report, the reader will find a table that lists the number of programs or projects addressing each Issue Area.



## Recruitment of Veterans Into National Service

Bringing veterans and military families into National Service is an area explicitly mentioned in the Serve America Act; indeed, as illustrated in the previous section, the majority of VMF programs and projects are making concerted efforts to meet this objective. While some grantees were quite successful in their efforts, others requested technical assistance from CNCS to improve their outreach to the target population. One recruitment strategy often reported to be critical to success is for civilian organizations to establish connections with military-affiliated organizations, which can in turn facilitate outreach to the veterans' population. Strategies that were noted as particularly successful in conducting outreach were those that involved direct communication, or what one interviewee described as "active" recruiting: Participating in veterans-oriented events, such as employment fairs, presentations to veteran-affiliated organizations, Stand Down events, and the like.

Interviewees also believed that veterans and their families are more likely to accept assistance offered by a military-affiliated individual than from a well-intentioned civilian, and thus stressed the importance of providing individual services through peer-to-peer connections.

The National Service stipend was reported by several interviewees as a barrier to recruiting VMF, many of whom have young families to support and thus are looking for full-time, well-paid employment in order to meet that obligation. Several interviewees said they were able to get veterans to look beyond the immediacy of the stipend amount by emphasizing the ways in which National Service could help them meet their employment goals: receiving basic assistance with resume writing, job interviewing techniques, and self-presentation; gaining new marketable skills; and establishing strong professional networks.

## Training Civilians to Engage Military-Affiliated Individuals

There are several facets of military culture that interviewees described as important for their civilian National Service participants and volunteers to understand. These include learning about military hierarchy and the implications of the chain of command, knowing what resources are available on-base (e.g., MWR offices) for spouses of deployed service members, learning frequently used military acronyms or terms, and understanding the stresses associated with deployment and reintegration. Interviewees also said their volunteers need to be familiar with service beneficiaries' potential combat-related challenges, including PTSD and TBI. Finally, for programs or projects that aim to link veterans with services or help them apply for benefits, interviewees spoke of the need to train

volunteers on the eligibility criteria for various benefits, and what information needs to be obtained – and forms completed – to file a benefits claim.

## **Assessment and Evaluation**

There are several areas of program assessment that were explored in the interview protocol, including needs assessments, program evaluations, and collecting measures of program effectiveness. In general, interviewees reported being very limited in all areas and often cited a lack of resources as the barrier. Only a few interviewees, for example, indicated that their service strategies resulted either from a community needs assessment or review of relevant community data. For most of these organizations, strategies for information-gathering were generally low-cost. They included discussions with community stakeholders (including veterans and military families) to identify available services and unmet needs among VMF, and meetings of service providers in the community (often fostered by VISTAs) to discuss where service gaps might exist. Moreover, just a handful of organizations reported having had program evaluations conducted by external parties, a finding not surprising due to the young age of many of the programs interviewed. In addition, even though receipt of CNCS funds requires all grantees to collect and report, at a minimum, programmatic outputs, interviewees varied considerably in their ability to report veterans-specific output data. Further, only a few organizations were collecting outcome data, very little of which was specific to VMF. Finally, no interviewees indicated that their veterans-focused programs or projects were collecting impact data. Because current funding opportunities often require organizations to demonstrate effectiveness through quantitative measures, this is one area in which grantees and sites could benefit from additional technical assistance from CNCS.

## **Noteworthy Programs**

Because the initiative to engage veterans and military families in National Service is a relatively new undertaking by CNCS, many study organizations had begun their VMF programs or projects only within the last six months to one year. In addition, many organizations are serving VMF for the first time and thus are adjusting their service approaches as they mature and learn. Consequently, it seems far too early to assess the effectiveness and impact of these various activities. Nevertheless, although few organizations were able to support their claims of effectiveness with defensible

quantitative data, interviewees described several programs and projects whose accomplishments caught the attention of the study team and merit further examination by CNCS. These include:

- The **VISTA project at Metropolitan Community College** in Omaha, Nebraska, which is supporting current military service members, veterans, and their families with the transition from military to college life by making them aware of the college and community resources available to them;
- The **Clallam-Jefferson County RSVP program**, operating under the Olympic (Washington) Community Action Program, whose volunteers are conducting telephone outreach to veterans in these rural counties to identify service needs and link them to appropriate resources. This RSVP program is part of the Vet Connect effort that is taking place throughout the state of Washington;
- The **Idaho Department of Labor – Veterans Serving Veterans AmeriCorps Program**, which has recruited veterans into all of its National Service slots to augment the services provided by the Department. Members have been trained to address low-intensity service requests of veterans seeking assistance (e.g., help with writing a resume, identification of resources), which frees Department staff to focus on veterans whose employment-related needs are more involved; and
- The **California Conservation Corps**, in which civilian VISTAs and veteran Corps members are partnering to find long-term employment for the veterans once their Corps tenure is complete.

CNCS is encouraged to followup with these and other organizations identified throughout the report to learn more about their activities and ascertain if they can provide valuable lessons learned for other National Service programs and projects.

## Summary

Study findings indicate that programs and projects are implementing a wide range of activities to serve VMF, from offering direct services that are in high demand to supporting community-wide efforts to coordinate service delivery to veterans. In addition, many organizations are recruiting veterans into their National Service positions in a concerted effort to improve their outreach to the target population. Importantly, *all* of the Issue Areas identified by the Serve America Act are being addressed by one or more of the organizations included in this study.

Despite their dedication to veterans, these organizations have faced – and still face – numerous challenges to achieving their objectives. For example, despite their best efforts, many civilian

organizations reported having difficulty recruiting VMF into National Service positions or as community volunteers. In addition, in numerous instances, the civilians who are supporting these organizations' efforts often know very little about military culture or the bureaucratic maze that must be negotiated if a veteran wants to apply for benefits or compensation. Many organizations did not have a training program in place to help bring their volunteers up to speed. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, although nearly all interviewees said their organizations' efforts to serve the military population have been effective, few had collected sufficient data to back up these claims.

Next steps might include the provision of additional training and technical assistance to grantees on areas the interviewees often identified as problematic. These include strategies to recruit VMF into National Service, how to develop and implement a training curriculum on military culture, how to conduct a cost-effective community needs assessment, and data collection strategies that can provide strong evidence of program or project effectiveness. Interviewees requested being able to share experiences with each other, thus the use of CNCS's Knowledge Network might offer an excellent forum for this exchange of ideas. Finally, because the study was able to identify several programs and projects that appear to be promising, CNCS is encouraged to conduct more in-depth case studies with several of these programs to learn more about their activities and their potential generalizability.

## Background

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) currently engages more than five million Americans in service through its flagship programs of Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and the Social Innovation Fund. CNCS also leads United We Serve, President Obama's national "Call to Service" initiative, and plays a critical role in strengthening America's nonprofit sector and addressing the nation's challenges through volunteer service. The primary partners for CNCS's work include high-performing nonprofit organizations that have service or volunteer-based program models, schools and universities, state service commissions, and the National Service participants who serve through CNCS programs.

The 2009 Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act reauthorized CNCS and established veterans and military families (VMF) as a priority area for the agency. This was in recognition of the fact that veterans, particularly younger veterans who are returning home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, are a population that can both benefit from and contribute to their communities through National Service (SAA Section 1101:14). The Serve America Act requires CNCS to evaluate grantees' recent and ongoing efforts to meet the needs of VMF through National Service, and to report back to the American public and Congress on their outcomes.

The need for community-driven solutions for this population is well documented, as relayed to the CNCS Senior Adviser for Veteran and Military Family Initiatives by the top military personnel officer for the National Guard:

A growing concern over the past few years among military leaders is providing for the education, employment and well-being needs of currently serving military, Veterans and their Families, especially those outside the gates of military installations. The question we now face is how to join community forces. Recently-retired Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, focused on this need during his tenure as Chairman, leading to the revitalization of the National Guard concept of the Inter-Service Family Assistance Committee (ISFAC), energizing support for our Service Members returning home to our communities. It also brought to the forefront a concept for coordinating community efforts to supplement Department of Defense and other Federal agency programs. Admiral Mullen's vision was to identify people,

organizations and agencies at the state and local level desiring to assist the military community but simply not knowing how. Now that our military forces are out of Iraq, and a plan is in place to substantially withdraw them from Afghanistan, the sacrifices of our Veterans and Families will quickly become less visible to the country. Therefore, it is imperative that Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin E. Dempsey's vision, linked with the ongoing efforts of the First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden on behalf of military families, be implemented nationally to mobilize this existing "groundswell of support." AmeriCorps members and Senior Corps volunteers have the power to support our military members and their Families at the state and local level with unprecedented "people-power." The two signature programs from the Corporation for National and Community Service empower nearly 5 million Americans in service to their communities every year. As our men and women in uniform return home, it is critical that we tap into this resource, align our efforts at the national, state and local levels, and capitalize on the AmeriCorps spirit of "getting things done." The time is right and the sacrifices of our Warriors, Veterans and their Families can be partially repaid through this effort to mobilize state and local communities in their support. But we must not stop there. Veterans and military Families are assets and leaders in their communities; we must, and can, engage them directly in improving their own communities ... as their service continues.

- General Marianne Watson, National Guard J1 (5 Feb 13).

## Study Objectives and Justification

National Service can serve a unique role in addressing the most pressing issues that VMF face by empowering individuals through service and building community capacity to identify and address local needs. Having already demonstrated a commitment to service, veterans have a wealth of skills that can help ameliorate our nation's most critical problems. At the same time, while returning veterans can be utilized in the civilian workforce, many need assistance to transition back into civilian life. National Service programs can provide much-needed services to VMF, facilitate veterans' ability to access existing services, and help prepare communities to receive veterans.

In response to the SAA evaluation requirement, in 2011 CNCS awarded a contract to Westat to conduct a field assessment of its grantees that are operating VMF-oriented programs. Because

CNCS's focus on supporting VMF-oriented National Service programs is relatively new, this assessment was intended to collect critical baseline data on CNCS grantees' activities and approaches to serving the population, and to identify those programs that have demonstrated a positive impact or indicate significant potential to do so. Westat conducted in-depth telephone interviews with representatives of 98 grantee organizations and sites from July through early November, 2012 to learn:

- What services, programs and projects are being offered to this population;
- The extent to which VMF are being recruited either as National Service participants or community volunteers;
- What data are being collected by programs and projects to assess the effectiveness of their efforts; and
- Which of the program activities may be identified as promising practices.

Of the 98 organizations interviewed, 85 are direct recipients of National Service awards. The remaining 13 organizations, which are labeled as "sites" in this report, receive National Service resources through direct recipients that act as intermediaries to distribute their grant monies to local sites where veteran-focused activities are being implemented. Of the 85 direct recipients, 12 serve as intermediary, or umbrella, organizations.

Findings from these interviews form the basis of several deliverables intended to support the future growth of the involvement of VMF in National Service, including: an inventory indicating which Serve America Act areas are being addressed by the programs and projects included in this study; this analytic report, which aims to detail critical aspects of program and project implementation; a learning document that will provide CNCS and its grantees with lessons from this evaluation that can help inform future efforts to involve VMF in National Service; and a searchable database that will allow CNCS program staff to readily identify which programs or projects are addressing specific issue areas or are using specific tools or strategies to implement their VMF activities. All deliverables under this contract will be finalized by February 28, 2013.

## Report Outline

This report presents the study team's detailed analysis of the interview data regarding program and project implementation activities. In the first section below, we present the study methodology,

including how programs and projects were selected to take part in the assessment, our data collection procedures, and the strategies we employed in analyzing the data for the various deliverables. This section is followed by the findings from our analysis of the interview data, including:

- The history of these organizations' use of National Service to meet the needs of veterans and military families,
- A summary of the service areas they are addressing,
- Organizations' experience recruiting veterans and military family members into National Service,
- Their efforts to train veterans in the culture of National Service and civilians in the culture unique to the military,
- The status of programs' and projects' efforts to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of their activities, and
- A description of a small sample of programs that show promise and that may merit additional exploration by CNCS.

The report concludes with an overall summary of study findings and a discussion of next steps for the continued development of VMF-oriented National Service programs and projects.



## Study Population: Identification and Recruitment Process

CNCS encourages its grant applicants to engage veterans and military families either as National Service participants or as service beneficiaries. It is generally the view of several members of Congress that because the “Veterans’ Service Corps” is not a standalone program with its own funding stream, CNCS does not have a ready means of identifying and tracking which programs or projects are engaging VMF. As the first step in the process of identifying grantees and sites for the study, CNCS compiled an initial list of 178 programs and projects,<sup>1</sup> representing AmeriCorps State and National, AmeriCorps VISTA, and Senior Corps, that Program Officers believed to be addressing veterans’ needs. CNCS then sent these grantees’ applications and/or annual reports to Westat for further review. Westat study team members conducted a comprehensive content review of the applications and/or annual reports, searching specifically for narratives that described substantial and/or strategic efforts to engage veterans and/or military families. In a few cases information about veterans-oriented services were missing from the narratives, but appeared as performance measurement goals. The study team developed an initial list of 90 grantees whose activities appeared to meet the study criteria. This list was then shared with the appropriate CNCS program staff who determined, based on their knowledge of the programs and projects, which grantees could be removed from the list (for example, a Program Officer would know if a program had not yet begun to implement activities to engage veterans), or if there were other grantees that were overlooked in the initial review, but should be included in the study. In addition, at the request of Koby Langley, Senior Advisor for Wounded Warrior, Veterans and Military Family Initiatives at CNCS, eight organizations were added to the list of interviewees. All of these are sub-grantees of the American Legion Auxiliary and are national organizations that serve veterans. Ultimately, 105 grantees were included in the study list.

CNCS then took several steps to maximize selected organizations’ participation in the study. First, Program Officers for AmeriCorps State and National, AmeriCorps VISTA, and Senior Corps let their selected programs know that the study would be taking place. CNCS sent a letter to the directors of these programs that provided detailed information about the study, including its aims

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<sup>1</sup> We have endeavored throughout this report to use term consistent with CNCS’s definitions: AmeriCorps grantees operate “programs,” VISTA grantees have “projects,” and RSVP grantees operate projects, but their volunteers are assigned to “stations”, i.e., community locations. “Grantees” are those organizations or entities that were the direct recipient of grant funds from CNCS. In several instances in this study, grantees did not implement the proposed activities, but passed CNCS funds to a local entity that ultimately implemented the program or project. We use “umbrella” to refer to those grantee organizations that funded local entities and “sites” to refer to those implementing organizations.

and objectives, data collection procedures, and how the data would be used to inform CNCS programming in the future. Directors were told that someone from Westat would contact them to schedule a 50-minute telephone interview, during which they would be asked about their program's development, strategies for engaging and/or serving VMF, any empirical evidence they had been able to collect that could demonstrate effectiveness and impact, and any suggestions they might have for ways that CNCS could assist their efforts going forward. The letter also noted that their participation in the study was voluntary. A list of *Frequently Asked Questions* was included with the letter, which gave recipients additional details about the study and how to contact Westat if they wished to opt out of the interview process.

Approximately one week after this letter was sent, Westat research team members began contacting organizations to schedule the interviews. During these initial phone calls, seven organizations indicated their programs were not engaging veterans or military families, and these organizations were removed from the list as “ineligible” for study participation. As a result, there were 99 organizations included in the final list of programs to be interviewed.

## Data Collection Process

### Interview Guide Development

The interview guide for this study was developed by Westat in close collaboration with the CNCS Study Manager. As suggested previously, the interviews sought to obtain a comprehensive synopsis of each program. Areas of particular interest included the impetus for program development (why veterans? why National Service?); what services are being offered to whom; if appropriate, a description of the needs assessment conducted by the organization prior to implementing the program; any data being collected to assess the program's impact on the veterans' population; and any evaluations that might have been conducted of the program. Interviewees were also asked to describe successful aspects of their programs, as well as any technical assistance that CNCS could provide to assist their efforts going forward.

Westat staff pilot tested the interview guide with nine organizations. Based on the results of the pilot test, the interview guide was modified to accommodate those programs or projects where the grantee organizations distributed their CNCS grants to other, local organizations to implement the programs or projects. A state-level agency, for example, may be the grant recipient, but the monies

pass down to local offices where the program is actually implemented. Similarly, there are national-level organizations that are CNCS grantees, but who redistribute those grant funds either to their local offices or to other national organizations that then implement veterans' service programs. In most of these cases, the grantee organization knew some details about the program, such as its history, but was unable to describe day-to-day program operations. Local program or project directors needed to be contacted in order to learn more about program activities, successes, and technical assistance needs. The protocol was adjusted to include a section for these "umbrella" contacts to gather lower-level contact information, as needed, to obtain details on the day-to-day program operations.

A 60-day public comment notice for the interview protocol was published in the Federal Register on March 30, 2012. The interview protocol was submitted to OMB Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs on June 12, 2012 for review, and received approval on June 22, 2012.

## **Conducting the Interviews**

Westat deployed seven staff members to conduct the interviews with the 99 organizations identified for the study sample. On June 13, 2012, prior to beginning any individual interviews, all staff participated in a web-based training. In addition to learning background information on CNCS and its initiatives to involve VMF in National Service, staff learned about the initial contact and scheduling procedures, reviewed the interview guide, discussed the interview process (including obtaining participants' permission for the interviews to be audio recorded), and reviewed the procedure for writing in-depth summaries at the conclusion of each interview. Other procedures, such as completing tracking sheets and where to store interview summaries, were also discussed during the training. Interviewers' assignments ranged from 8 to 21 interviews apiece, with an average of just under 13 interviews each. The first interview took place on July 6<sup>th</sup>, the last on November 5<sup>th</sup>. The vast majority of the interviews occurred between mid-July and mid-September, 2012. All but one of the organizations identified for the study completed the interview, resulting in 98 interviews and a 99 percent response rate.

## Data Analysis

Over the course of this study, each team member had the opportunity to work with a different set of cases for each of several different sub-tasks. For example, staff were assigned organizations to interview based on National Service program type, i.e., a staff member might interview only organizations that had VISTA projects. This consistency in assignments ensured staff member familiarity with the characteristics of a specific program, which in turn led to more robust interviews. Similarly, as Westat developed the inventory of organizations for CNCS, staff were assigned a set of cases to assess for specific issue areas included under the Serve America Act (e.g., Military Families, Education, Community Coordination, etc.). In the first round of review, a staff member reviewed summaries of her own organizations and those of two other interviewers and determined which issue areas the organization was addressing through its activities. After this initial review, staff met to discuss how they classified each organization and to resolve any uncertainties. In the second round, staff members reviewed a different set of cases in order to double-check each other's work and ensure consistency in classification.

For this report, the cases were assigned yet another way: Each analyst reviewed the interviews she had conducted (approximately one dozen each) and was also randomly assigned an additional twenty interviews that had been conducted by others. While reviews for the inventory aimed to identify solely the issue areas being addressed by program activities, the purpose of this analysis was to identify how National Service programs can best fulfill the unmet needs of VMF. Each analyst was charged with reviewing interview summaries and audio recordings for all of her assigned programs and answering the following critical topic areas and questions:

- **Experience Serving Veterans and Military Families Through National Service.** What prompted organizations to serve this population through a National Service model?
- **Service Areas.** What types of services do organizations provide with the help of CNCS funding?
- **VMF and National Service.** How many NSP are providing services to VMF? And of these, how many are themselves VMF?
- **Community Volunteers.** To what extent are organizations recruiting community volunteers to support their activities? For those who are, to what extent are they focused on recruiting VMF as community volunteers?

- **Recruitment Strategies.** For organizations seeking to recruit VMF as National Service participants and/or community volunteers, what volunteer recruitment methods appear to be most effective and why?
- **Training and Oversight.** How do grantees and sites train and monitor the activities of their members?
- **Performance Data.** What, if any, data are organizations collecting to assess the effectiveness of their programs?
- **Needs Assessments.** Did organizations conduct a local needs assessment to determine that the services they provide are of greatest need to the local VMF population? If so, what did the assessment look like?
- **Program Evaluation.** Are these organizations conducting program evaluations? If so, are they assessing the value-added of National Service?
- **Promising Practices.** Which practices do organizations identify as “promising”? What evidence do they have to support that assessment? Is there anything described in the interview that the interviewer or analyst believes to be a promising practice? If so, what is the basis for that assessment?
- **Unique Contributions of National Service.** Which contributions or aspects of National Service did interviewees identify as being uniquely valuable to meeting the service needs of the population?
- **Technical Assistance.** What tools or technical assistance did interviewees say CNCS might provide to further assist them in their efforts to serve VMF?

Each analyst was then assigned a subset of these topics and reviewed findings for all organizations to ascertain any patterns in the data. For example, one analyst reviewed the findings across all organizations regarding program evaluations: How many organizations reported having an evaluation done? What were the most common reasons given for *not* having a program evaluated? For those that did have an evaluation, was National Service part of the assessment? This report is based on team members’ analyses of these key areas across all 98 programs or projects that were interviewed.



## Findings

This study involved the collection, analysis, and interpretation of qualitative data that are not easily reduced to numbers. Indeed, with the exception of the “Services” section, we have explicitly avoided expressing our findings in precise quantities. There are several reasons for this: First, interviewees did not always interpret our questions and terms in the same way. “Needs assessment,” for example, was broadly interpreted by interviewees, who described everything from community summits and reviews of demographic data to focus groups with stakeholders. They described a range of activities, all in support of the development of their programs, but did not appear to share a common definition of a needs assessment. While we used established standards for such practices in interpreting the interviewees’ responses, we are reluctant to translate such wide-ranging responses into hard and fast numbers. Secondly, the depth of the information we were able to obtain varied with the individuals who were interviewed; some had been with the organizations since their programs began, while others had arrived only a couple of months prior to the interview. Our analysis is based on the program details we received, but those details may be incomplete. Finally, any counts presented ultimately are the result of analyst judgment, particularly with respect to the table in the “Services” section. To produce this table, Westat staff developed an operational definition for the nine Issue Areas within the Serve America Act; we subsequently added a tenth area (“Community Coordination”) that emerged from the data, but that was not encompassed by the legislative language. We then categorized the services that interviewees said their organizations provide. Although our classifications are based on imprecise data, we are confident that this report accurately characterizes the study organizations as a group, i.e., many more organizations provide employment support services than transportation supports; support to military families, including the mentoring of youth with a service member parent, is an area that is receiving relatively little attention among grantees. Nevertheless, we recognize that another group of analysts might operationalize the Issue Areas a little differently, or decide that an interviewee’s description of “community coordination” is not quite the same as that described by others. The exact counts may change, but the relative provision of services will remain stable.

We also note that throughout this report that some organizations receive significant attention even though they may represent a phenomenon that is infrequent (e.g., training programs for National Service participants). The intent behind these descriptions is to provide illustrative examples for that set of cases, but not necessarily “best practices.” The widespread lack of performance data among study organizations prevents us from making that assessment. Nevertheless, based on interviewees’ descriptions, we believe these programs merit future additional attention because some of their

activities may be transferable to other organizations. It is critical that all data produced via this qualitative research effort be interpreted with the above limitations in mind.

Despite these caveats, overall, our analysis of the interview data revealed several key findings. First, and perhaps most importantly, a large number of programs and projects included in this study are relatively new in terms of engaging veterans and military families through National Service. Many, in fact, had just finished their first year of operations at the time of the interview. Because CNCS grants are awarded for a three-year period of performance, most program and projects have yet to reach maturity. Thus, any conclusions drawn from these data must be viewed as preliminary.

Secondly, despite their relative infancy, interviewees consistently reported the importance of recognizing the strong bonds and implicit trust among individuals who share the beliefs, values, and experience that comprise military culture. Many interviewees from civilian organizations said the success of their programs could be attributed to their ability to bring military culture into their activities, either by establishing partnerships with veterans-serving organizations or recruiting veterans as National Service participants or community volunteers. Such linkages lent credibility to their efforts, they said, and thus improved their ability to connect with and serve military-affiliated individuals. Importantly, the need for creating such linkages, either through organizational partnerships or recruitment of veterans into National Service, was one of the technical assistance needs most commonly cited by interviewees.

Third, in spite of their claims of effective service delivery to the target population, very few organizations reported having strong, objective evidence to support these claims. Only a few reported that their program had undergone a formal evaluation, and in some cases we believe interviewees were referring not to evaluations *per se*, but to CNCS monitoring visits. Further, only a handful of programs reported having outcome data on their service recipients, and none had impact data to share with the study team. Consequently, the promising practices and noteworthy programs described in this report are based entirely on the analysts' assessment of anecdotal data.

Finally, in spite of the above limitations, we believe that almost all of the organizations interviewed as part of this study are truly dedicated to trying to meet the needs of veterans and military family members. In an environment where nonprofits are struggling to obtain sufficient funds simply to keep their program doors open, the cynical observer might regard organizations as looking for funding opportunities first, and then crafting program descriptions to fit the grant objectives. Discussions with grantees about the impetus for their programs, however, revealed that many were approached by local veterans and had been contemplating how to meet this population's needs prior



to CNCS identifying veterans as a priority service area. Many described the grant announcements as coming “at an opportune time” in their own planning processes. We cannot dismiss the possibility that interviewees’ accounts were affected by social desirability, but the details of many of their accounts suggest the authenticity of their motives.

## **History of the Study Organizations**

### **Overview**

Interviewees reported different levels of organizational experience using National Service to engage veterans and military families. In about half of the study organizations, our team learned that a program or project had a long history of working with the military population, but this involvement was more the result of circumstances (e.g., proximity to a military installation) than an intentional effort. For the other half of the sample, their veteran-focused efforts began with the Serve America Act of 2009. Civilian organizations may have been sponsoring National Service programs or projects for many years, but their connection to the veterans was less than three years old; conversely, all of the Veterans Service Organizations and State and Federal military agencies were new to the use of National Service to meet the needs of their population. As a result, melding these two arenas continues to be a work in progress.

### **Engaging Veterans and Military Families Through National Service**

Working with veterans and military families was not a new experience for about half of the civilian organizations included in this study. For example, all of the RSVP programs indicated previous work with this population, but largely as a function of a cohort effect, not a deliberate effort. Because RSVP volunteers must be age 55 or older, the cohort itself includes large veterans’ populations from the Vietnam War, Korean War, and World War II. Additionally, RSVP programs tend to serve older populations, which, similarly, include a large population of veterans from America’s 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts. Geography also played a role in organizations’ previous experiences with the population. Several National Service sponsors are located in communities that are in close proximity to military installations, where many residents are not only families of active duty personnel, but also retired service members. Military-affiliated individuals often become community volunteers, and also may be the beneficiaries of the organization’s services to low-income residents. Finally, some

organizations have always provided services in areas of particular interest to veterans. For example, National Service sponsors who endeavor to meet low-income citizens' housing needs reported having engaged with veterans prior to 2009, as veterans are disproportionately represented among America's homeless population. That history notwithstanding, interviewees said their organizations had not begun tracking services to this population until the last couple of years, consonant with CNCS's emphasis on serving veterans and military families.

The remaining organizations we interviewed reported they have only started working with veterans in the last few years. Some of the interviewees said their organizations' focus on serving VMF has been in response to emergent needs in their communities: service members returning from combat with disabling conditions (e.g., traumatic brain injuries, PTSD) that require supports and services; young family members adjusting to a new community because the service member parent has been deployed yet again; or retired and discharged service members having trouble finding employment. Others said the needs in their communities have been longstanding, but until recently, there had been no funding mechanism to support any attempts to address the problems. CNCS's emphasis on veterans' services, they said, provided just the spark that was needed. For example, one housing provider said that he had been in talks with numerous community service providers about coordinating their efforts to better meet the needs of the local homeless population, which included veterans. The CNCS announcement, the interviewee said, seemed to be the perfect "alignment" between the community's interests and funding – a VISTA could help spearhead the collaboration among the community providers. But the other organizations reportedly failed to follow-through with the application process. As a result, the interviewee's agency ended up going after the grant on their own. In other, similar cases, however, interviewees described remarkable VISTA-led efforts in their communities to improve communication and coordination among service providers and develop resource directories for veterans and their families.

This study included a variety of veteran serving organizations (VSOs), either Congressionally chartered Veterans' Service Organizations, state or Federal agencies or offices that serve only veterans and military families (e.g., a state's Department of Veterans' Affairs office), and even organizations operating within the National Guard or military installations. Certainly these organizations are not new to serving the target population, but several were new to doing so through National Service. Several of these organizations receive their National Service funding through the American Legion Auxiliary Corps, which has both an AmeriCorps and VISTA grant. When asked what led their organizations to turn to National Service to meet their population's needs, interviewees credited their relationship with ALA as providing the impetus for this approach. One woman, for example, said that through her organization's collaboration with the ALA, she learned

that AmeriCorps members mirror the demographics of the population the organization wants to serve, and that these members may have some of the skills (such as how to write a research paper) that her regular staff lack. She thus believed her organization would benefit from having AmeriCorps members. Another interviewee said he was encouraged by the character of the National Service participants, who, like many members of the military, “really made a conscious decision to volunteer and to serve an organization of their choice.” He added it was “telling” that these individuals decided “to serve the country through a non-profit organization and to serve veterans.” He viewed National Service participants and military veterans as sharing a common set of values around selfless dedication to America and thus believed this would be an excellent fit.

## **Unique Contributions of National Service**

All respondents whose organizations just recently joined National Service were asked what led them to that decision, and the clarity of responses varied significantly. But each interviewee also was asked how National Service had contributed to his/her organization’s ability to meet the needs of VMF. Their responses to this question fell into one of three categories, one of which specifically identified the value of having military-affiliated individuals as National Service participants or community volunteers.

### ***Importance of Military-Affiliated National Service Participants***

Interviewees pointed to several benefits of having National Service participants who are veterans and/or military family members. First, they said, these military-affiliated individuals are better able to identify the unspoken needs of others who are or have been a part of the military community. Their familiarity with this population, they said, enables their organizations to create tailored outreach programs to better connect with veterans in need. For example, study participants spoke of the fellowship, camaraderie and “brotherhood” that exists between veterans, and that that fellowship is often helpful in getting former service members to engage in available supports or services<sup>2</sup>. Interviewees from RSVP programs added that veterans who need transportation to medical appointments report feeling more comfortable if their drivers are also veterans, in large part because other veterans better understand some of the (combat-related) medical conditions with which they are dealing. The effectiveness of veterans serving veterans also has been recognized by one

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<sup>2</sup> This shared bond is most commonly referred to in the military community as *esprit de corps*.

AmeriCorps grantee who has placed a strong emphasis on peer-to-peer supports in its behavioral health services.

Several interviewees also perceived National Service to be in line with veterans' experience and values: First, they are already accustomed to working together as a team to focus on a shared mission. In several programs, such as the various Conservation Corps, participants must work together in crews – their experience with team-based efforts transitions readily to these endeavors. Some viewed these team efforts to contribute to the veterans' healing and reintegration. Secondly, said many interviewees, veterans have a strong commitment to serving others (see below). National Service allows veterans to continue serving their communities and country while gaining useful skills (e.g., resource management, carpentry, electrical skills) that could lead to civilian employment.

### ***Commitment and Responsibility***

National Service participants, whether military-affiliated or civilians, were perceived by interviewees to have a deep sense of volunteerism and commitment to improving their communities. As one study interviewee described it, National Service participants have a “vibrant, contagious passion” to serve their communities. In this respect, they are not different from community volunteers; where they are unique, though, is that they are committed to full-time service. One interviewee said, “These individuals really made a conscious decision to volunteer and to serve an organization of their choice. They applied to AmeriCorps VISTA *and* they applied to our organization.” Another interviewee believed that this deep commitment, gives them “a lot more community presence than part-time volunteers.”

Several organizations' leaders, encouraged by this level of commitment, assigned their National Service participants important organizational development tasks, such as conducting needs assessments, developing partnerships with other community organizations, and even communicating with the media. The director of one military-oriented organization, an Iraqi War veteran, said he reflected on his own responsibilities as a 19-year old unit leader in a combat zone and realized that his civilian VISTAs could take on more responsibility than he had originally given them:

*“Just because they’re VISTAs doesn’t mean they can’t be empowered. Why do you have to have 10 years of experience to talk to the media or coordinate a conference? I don’t think you do. If you’re smart and talented, you can figure things out quickly.”*

Now in his second year of a VISTA project, this director said that both of his VISTAs have been given responsibility for specific portfolios. “The work that they do we might see directors of other non-profits taking care of.”

### ***Expansion of the Quality and Quantity of Services Organizations Can Offer***

As a result of the value added by National Service participants, said interviewees, organizations were able to offer a greater number of services or expand their reach. National Service participants “fill in the blanks” when other staff do not have time, they said, or “supplement staff capacity” for thinly staffed nonprofits. Interviewees frequently described their National Service participants as “energetic and committed to hard work,” dedicated, optimistic, and resourceful. In a couple of cases, interviewees reported that their National Service participants have a better work ethic than an organization’s full-time employees; as a result, they said these offices or organizations have become measurably more productive through National Service. One interviewee, for example, reported this phenomenon with respect to an employment agency that was serving veterans; another reported it for an office that was dedicated to connecting veterans to needed resources.

Interviewees also described their National Service participants as “excellent teachers, researchers and writers” who could help meet the needs of their communities. A couple of organizations applied for VISTA grants specifically with the intent of using VISTAs to conduct a needs assessment for veterans in their communities. These efforts were just getting underway at the time of the telephone interviews.

## **Services Provided to Veterans and Military Families**

### **Overview**

Organizations included in this study offer a wide array of services, from mentoring youth and helping military families cope with the stresses of deployment and reintegration, to helping veterans access needed social and medical resources. Although interviewees described varying levels of success with these relatively new efforts to engage veterans and military families, all were endeavoring to address the most pressing needs identified for this population. CNCS grant funds

thus appeared to be making noticeable contribution to serving military-affiliated individuals and families.

## Serve America Act Requirements

In 2009, the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act (SAA) called on the Corporation for National and Community Service to “recognize the expertise that veterans can offer to National Service programs, expand the participation of the veterans in the National Service programs, and assist the families of veterans and members of the Armed Forces on active duty” [Sec. 1101]. The legislation identified nine areas that CNCS grantees should address through their programs and, as noted below, Westat identified a tenth issue area where organizations are attempting to meet the needs of this population:

1. **Services and Supports to Military Families.** Promote community-based efforts to meet the unique needs of military families while a family member is deployed and upon that family member’s return home.
2. **Volunteer Opportunities for Veterans.** Recruit veterans, particularly returning veterans, into service opportunities, including opportunities that utilize their military experience.
3. **Education and Certifications.** Assist veterans in developing their educational opportunities (including opportunities for professional certification, licensure, or credentials), coordinating activities with and assisting state and local agencies administering veterans’ education benefits.
4. **Employment.** Coordinate activities with and assisting entities administering veterans’ programs with internships and fellowships that could lead to employment in the private and public sectors.
5. **Access to Benefits.** Promote efforts within a community to serve the needs of veterans and active duty members of the Armed Forces, including helping veterans file benefits claims and assisting Federal agencies in providing services to veterans.
6. **Military Children.** Provide mentorships to military children, including assisting veterans in developing mentoring relationships with economically disadvantaged students.
7. **Transportation.** Develop projects to assist veterans with disabilities, veterans who are unemployed, older veterans, and veterans in rural communities, including assisting veterans described in this clause with transportation.

8. **Disaster Preparedness.** Coordinate with entities in establishing the National Service Reserve Corps, through which veterans can serve in disasters and emergencies.
9. **Wellness and Other Support Services.** Assist veterans and their family members through establishing or augmenting programs that assist such persons with access to legal assistance, health care (including mental health care), employment counseling or training, education counseling or training, affordable housing, and other support services.
10. **Community Coordination.** Facilitate the coordination of care for veterans in the local community. This category was not identified specifically in the SAA, but has emerged as an important focus of several organizations.

Table 1 summarizes the array of services that interviewees described their organizations providing to veterans and military families in their communities. These findings suggest that CNCS grantees are ensuring that their funds are being used to address those issue areas described in the SAA requirements.

**Table 1.** Issue areas being addressed by organizations in the study

Issue area	Number of Interviews	Grantees <sup>1</sup>	Sites <sup>2</sup>	AmeriCorps	VISTA	AmeriCorps and VISTA <sup>3</sup>	Senior Corps (RSVP & FGP)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>20</b>
Services and Supports to Military Families	24	20	4	7	7	3	7
Volunteer Opportunities for Veterans	62	53	9	25	19	4	14
Education and Certifications	25	22	3	12	10	1	2
Employment	43	39	4	24	13	-	6
Access to Benefits	26	23	3	11	5	-	10
Youth Mentoring	18	13	5	4	8	2	4
Transportation	21	20	1	3	3	-	15
Disaster Preparedness	4	4	-	3	1	-	-
Wellness and Other Support Services	59	52	7	18	21	2	18
Community Coordination	18	15	3	2	12	1	3

\* Grantees typically offer services in more than one Issue Area; therefore, the total count for all Issue Areas is greater than the total number of grantees.

<sup>1</sup> This column includes the 12 intermediary organizations mentioned in the text; those organizations are further identified as intermediaries in the tables at the end of this report.

<sup>2</sup> Sites sometimes receive a sub grant from an intermediary organization while in other cases they serve as a service point with the intermediary providing centralized supervision. Sites are *not* CNCS grantees but sub grantees or service points for CNCS grantees.

<sup>3</sup> This column includes those organizations that received both AmeriCorps State and National and VISTA awards to support activities that involve veterans and military families.



As illustrated in Table 1, the area most frequently covered by grantees is providing volunteer opportunities for veterans and their families, which was reported by 62 organizations. This category includes those organizations that recruit veterans and/or military family members as National Service participants, community volunteers, or both. Not included in this figure are the grantees who indicated the recruitment of veterans or military family members is incidental and not deliberative to their program. We believe there to be two explanations for the large number of organizations engaging the target population in volunteer opportunities: First, numerous interviewees indicated that their organizations' services are now being targeted towards veteran and/or military families. With that targeting has come a widespread realization about the effectiveness of having veterans reach out to other veterans who might be in need of specific services or supports. While many organizations began their National Service programs or projects with this idea in mind and engaged veterans and/or military family members at the outset, a few interviewees indicated that their organizations discovered this through experience (i.e., they happened to have a veteran National Service participant and realized that s/he was more effective in conducting outreach than their civilian participants). Both processes resulted in large numbers of military-affiliated individuals being engaged in providing services and supports.

Secondly, although commented upon less often, interviewees expressed the belief that National Service and volunteering provide excellent opportunities for veterans to reintegrate into civilian life. For example, and as noted earlier, there was an often-expressed belief that volunteering and service to others aligns closely with service members' values. This is particularly true of the Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans, they said, who all volunteered to serve their country. In addition, in an economy where jobs are difficult to come by, National Service can provide returning service members with skill development opportunities that may ultimately translate into employment. This was commonly remarked upon by representatives of the various Conservation Corps, but was also recognized in the capacity-building efforts of VISTAs or direct services provided by AmeriCorps members.

The second most common issue area is Wellness and Other Support Services (Issue Area 9), which includes a wide array of services, including linkages to housing, legal services, and behavioral health supports, as well as an array of "recognition" services offered by National Service programs. Of the 59 interviewees who said their organizations provide one of the services within this issue area, nearly half of them (27) said their focus is on housing services (e.g., shelters, home-building). AmeriCorps programs (12) and VISTA projects (12) represent the majority of organizations working in this area. Nineteen organizations – fourteen of which are RSVP grantees – provide morale-boosting services that are specific to veterans, such as friendly visiting at hospitals, grave decorating ceremonies,



recognition days to honor veterans' service, and the like. Another seventeen interviewees indicated that their programs offer some kind of behavioral health support services, including peer supports for PTSD, mental health counseling, or 12-step groups for substance abuse. Once again, AmeriCorps programs (8) and VISTA projects (8) were most likely to provide services in this area. Ten organizations offer legal assistance to veterans, including mentoring and supports for former offenders, eight organizations provide financial literacy training or other financial support services to veteran and/or military families, and eight assist veterans with obtaining food, whether through vouchers, connecting veterans with food banks, or serving hot meals. We caution the reader about placing too much emphasis on these numbers, however, because Issue Area 9 is made up of such a diverse array of services. Moreover, the large number of organizations providing services in these areas is not surprising, *not* because veterans as a group are in dire straits, but because these are the focal areas for nonprofit organizations dedicated to addressing communities' most pressing needs, such as health care or housing. Organizations that offer such services thus can use their CNCS grant funds to pay particular attention to the number of veterans who come to them for services.

The third Issue Area most often addressed by study organizations was employment supports, which includes on-the-job training opportunities, general employment support, such as help with resume writing and interviewing skills, and hosting or referring their beneficiaries to job fairs. Of the 43 organizations that said they offer such services, 24 have AmeriCorps programs and 13 run VISTA projects. Five of the AmeriCorps programs are affiliated with one of the Conservation Corps included in this study. We believe there to be two explanations for the large number of organizations operating in the employment arena: First, employment services overlap with several other issue areas, such as education and training, disaster preparedness, and even engaging in volunteer opportunities. Volunteering with a housing rehabilitation organization, for example, was seen by one interviewee as giving the veteran an opportunity to learn skills in the building trades (e.g., framing, electrical work). Thus, a veteran might volunteer to provide services in one issue area, but s/he would be obtaining marketable skills in the process. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it suggests that these programs are truly focused on addressing the most pressing needs for veterans, the foremost of which is unemployment. National Service thus may be a particularly effective approach for helping veterans reintegrate into the civilian workforce.

A fourth critical area is education. The GI Bill 2.0 of 2010 offers veterans expanded coverage for vocational training and technical certifications, increased tuition and fee rates for veterans attending public institutions, and expanded coverage for some National Guard members. The Bill also expands educational benefits to certain members of the military and their families. Consonant with this new emphasis on educational opportunities, twenty-five of the organizations we interviewed

provide services that support veterans' use of educational services and benefits; twenty-two are grant recipients and 3 are sites. Twelve of the 25 are AmeriCorps grantees, 10 operate VISTA projects, one program is supported by both AmeriCorps and VISTA funds, and 2 are operating programs with Senior Corps funds. Our review of the interview data suggest that these educational efforts tend to fall into one of three categories:

- **The Student Veteran Corps Model.** A number of the grantees we interviewed run Student Veterans' Offices or Student Veterans' Corps, all with the general goal of ensuring that veterans are integrated into college campuses and have high retention rates. Services supported by these efforts include assistance navigating the college campus, counseling and help with family issues, educational tutoring, development of guides to veterans' resources or organizations in the community, assistance with disability issues, and, importantly, peer support networks.
- **Professional Training Programs.** Several organizations interviewed provide professional training programs, some of which lead to professional certifications. Because the ultimate intent of these programs is to promote employment opportunities, they are also listed under Issue Area 4. Particularly good examples of such programs are the various Conservation Corps, which provide veterans with professional skill training in firefighting, natural resource management, energy conservation, and other areas of environmental concern. Programs also may give veterans the opportunity to receive professional certification in the above, or related, areas.
- **Basic or Remedial Education.** Finally, some of the organizations provide basic or remedial education training in various areas, including (among others) computer skills. These services were developed in response to observed needs among the (often older) veterans' population in some of these communities.

We also point out Issue Area 7, which focuses on providing transportation services to veterans. RSVP programs are strongly represented in this area, making up 15 of the 21 organizations that indicated they provide such services. RSVP programs are distinct from VISTA and AmeriCorps in that RSVP volunteers, by virtue of their age cohort, are often veterans themselves. The volunteers thus are naturally providing peer supports for the younger group of returning veterans. In addition, many RSVP programs included in this study are located in rural areas, where distances to health care services may be far and public transportation non-existent. Driving veterans to the VA hospital for an appointment is thus a critical service in such locations. National Service takes many different forms, but our data indicate there is a role for everyone who is willing to contribute to this effort.

Eighteen organizations, twelve of which are VISTA and one of which has an AmeriCorps grant and VISTA grant, indicated that they focus on coordinating care (Issue Area 10) among service organizations in their region. This is being done explicitly to reduce duplication of services and to

ensure that veterans are able to find the resources they need. This category was not identified specifically in the SAA, but it was noted as a significant focus by these organizations and thus was added to the list. It is also not particularly surprising that we find a number of VISTA projects focusing on this area since a primary aim of the program is build community capacity.

There are relatively few organizations working in Issue Area 8, which calls on grantees to provide an opportunity for veterans to serve in disasters and emergencies. Although this is a common focus of the National Community Conservation Corps, it is not generally addressed by AmeriCorps or VISTA grantees. Interestingly, of those programs addressing this area, all are part of the Conservation Corps movement. Despite their low numbers, programs in this Issue area could provide informative models for a future National Service Reserve Corps.

## **Recruitment Into National Service**

### **Overview**

Bringing veterans and military families into National Service is an area explicitly mentioned in the Serve America Act, and as illustrated in the previous section, the majority of VMF-oriented programs are making concerted efforts to recruit veterans and military families as National Service participants and community volunteers. Through the interviews, we were able to identify a few programs that provided examples of recruitment strategies that they found to be successful, which include creating strong linkages with veterans-serving organizations in the community, and promoting National Service as a way for veterans to gain new skills and build strong networks that could lead to future employment. Yet many interviewees expressed difficulty creating such linkages or figuring out the best way to help young veteran applicants look beyond the perceived-low National Service stipend. One of the most common technical assistance requests was for CNCS to provide guidance on recruitment strategies that appear to be most effective. In this section, we present first the common challenges expressed by programs, followed by examples of recruitment strategies that merit further examination by CNCS as potential tools that may be used by programs to address challenges in VMF recruitment.

## VMF as National Service Participants and Community Volunteers

As noted in Section II, many organizations recognized the value-added of having veterans or military family members reach out to other military-affiliated individuals. The shared culture, including common experiences and knowing the language of the military, was said by interviewees to be invaluable in creating connections and encouraging otherwise reluctant individuals to accept needed services or supports. In numerous instances, particularly with respect to RSVPs and community volunteers, interviewees said that their organizations had not had to recruit specifically for this population; once the organization's focus on serving military-affiliated individuals became known about in the community, veterans and military family members often contacted the organization and offered to help. One example was a housing provider that was going to have a "community build" for a wounded veteran. The interviewee said that the organization did not have to conduct any specific efforts to get veterans to assist in the build; awareness in the community of the individual for whom the house was being constructed was enough, she said, to bring veterans out to support this effort. Others reported having no trouble recruiting military-affiliated individuals for short-term volunteer opportunities, such as Stand Down or Armed Forces Day events, Welcome Home celebrations, and other community events.

Of those organizations that reported specific efforts to recruit veterans and/or military families into National Service positions, several were struggling with effective recruiting strategies. In fact, three organizations said they had deliberately focused on recruiting the target population, but had yet to fill any of their positions. Organizations that were less successful recruiting VMF described several barriers. Numerous interviewees said they were having difficulty initiating relationships with military-affiliated individuals or organizations. Some said these military organizations were not familiar with National Service and thus were reluctant to connect their veterans with these opportunities. In at least one instance, the interviewee said that although it took some time, the local veterans' organization had come to realize the value of National Service and the fact that the community organization really was intent on meeting the needs of the veterans' population. They had since developed a relationship that she believed would improve their ability to recruit veterans or family members into volunteer opportunities. A few organizations that had just completed their first or second full program year said they anticipate they will be able to recruit more easily in the future, now that key relationships have been established and their efforts are becoming more talked-about in the community. Others, however, continued to struggle and requested assistance from CNCS in validating their programs to and making connections with these veterans' groups.

An additional recruitment challenge reported by some interviewees was the stipend for National Service participation. In several cases, interviewees found the stipend amount too low to be attractive to the military population. Many service members are trying to support young families, they said, and need a higher income than the stipend provides. One interviewee said that one way to overcome this barrier was to emphasize the non-financial benefits of National Service, particularly skill-building and the development of professional connections that could lead to full-time employment going forward. In other instances, interviewees said potential recruits were worried that the stipend might negatively affect their GI benefits or income they receive from serving in the National Guard. These concerns might be readily alleviated by CNCS developing a fact sheet for veterans on the relation between their GI benefits and the benefits of National Service.

A third challenge was mentioned by only one interviewee, but appears to merit some careful consideration. This interviewee is operating a VISTA program, and reported that she has had difficulty recruiting veterans into the positions because they are more interested in directly helping their fellow veterans than in building capacity for a community organization. Although she eventually was able to fill two of her three slots with veterans, both VISTAs did engage somewhat directly with other veterans (e.g., visiting in homeless shelters, conducting outreach for the local Stand Down) because, they said, this was more rewarding to them. Organizations that recruit veterans into National Service positions may need to create more obvious connections between community capacity-building and how it ultimately meets the needs of veterans and military families.

## **Recruiting Strategies**

### ***Establishing Connections with Veterans Organizations***

Many of the organizations participating in this study are community based organizations (CBOs) whose traditional focus has been on mitigating the effects of poverty. Services are often oriented towards finding secure housing for individuals or families, alleviating hunger, or offering employment supports and services. Others are government entities that have a specific focus, such as employment, community development, or natural resource management. All may have served some veterans in the past, but most did so only in the course of providing their regular services, not as a targeted population.

The newness of working with veterans and their families emerged clearly during the interviews, as a commonly expressed theme was the recognition of a unique culture associated with the military, one

based on shared experience and expressed in its own language. Civilians certainly can reach out to this population, but, interviewees said, real connections are best established via a military link. At the agency level, the link occurs through collaborations with veterans' serving organizations in the community. Some interviewees described how their VISTAs have focused their capacity-building efforts on fostering such relationships. For example, the goal of one grant was for VISTAs to provide support and additional capacity building efforts to four RSVP programs that were connecting veterans and military families with needed services and supports, including health care, financial support, housing, and the like. The VISTAs were brought in to help create a resource directory that organizations could use; they also helped to develop peer support networks, primarily by recruiting community volunteers who were veterans to serve as mentors to younger veterans; finally, and importantly, they developed Regional Work Groups (RWGs) to rally organizations in the community to work together to meet the needs of this population. During the VISTAs' tenure, the RWGs convened monthly to exchange information and ideas about serving the population and to help ensure there was not a duplication of services. The interviewee reported that the RWGs' meeting schedule extended beyond the length of the grant, and thus would continue after the VISTAs had left the organization. Participating agencies also planned to continue to visit each other's organizations and call each other when they have a specific need.

While the VISTA program model appears to be particularly promising in helping organizations to connect with a veterans' network, such work does not require a VISTA, as evidenced in several RSVP programs that have benefitted from their geographic location. One program for example, is in a county that is home to both an Army installation and an Air Force base. The county also has a large population of retired service members that has been served by RSVP for many years through what the interviewee called a "volunteer clearinghouse" for veterans' service-providing organizations. Examples of RSVP volunteer stations include the Army installation's Medical Center, the VA Hospital, a state veterans' nursing home, other medical clinics, military museums, and a thrift shop on post where the proceeds help fund the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) office. Services offered by the volunteers include mostly patient relations, transportation to medical appointments, and assisting in the chaplain's office and other offices, as needed. Non-medical services include income tax preparation assistance, Meals on Wheels, and help reading newspapers and magazines for people who are visually impaired. The interviewee believed the effectiveness of their program can be credited to their longstanding relationships with the numerous veterans' service organizations throughout the area. CNCS may consider evaluating recruitment effectiveness in National Service programs that are located in military-dense communities versus those that are not as well positioned geographically.

## ***Reaching Out to Veterans***

These linkages are not just invaluable at the organizational level; as we have noted elsewhere in this report, veterans and their families are perceived as being more likely to accept assistance offered by a military-affiliated individual than from a well-intentioned civilian who has no military connections. Numerous interviewees thus stressed the importance of providing individual services through peer-to-peer connections. For example, an interviewee with an RSVP transportation program said that many of the veterans in need of transportation services have suffered emotional as well as physical trauma, and find it difficult to relate on a day-to-day basis with members of the society that they are reentering. The veteran volunteer drivers, she said, by virtue of their shared experiences, are able to create relationships with these injured veterans.

Strategies that interviewees noted as particularly successful in conducting outreach were those that involved direct communication, or what one interviewee described as “active” recruiting: Participating in veterans-oriented events, such as employment fairs, presentations to veteran-affiliated organizations, Stand Down events, and the like; collaborating closely with military-dedicated organizations, such as the American Legion or local National Guard unit; and even word of mouth as veterans communicated their positive experiences to other veterans. Peer-to-peer outreach was also effective. For example, on college campuses, student veterans’ organizations or resource centers were reported to be very effective in attracting veterans and their families into National Service positions or as community volunteers. Many organizations also reported making use of social media sites, such as Craigslist and Idealist (a website specific to volunteer opportunities); they reported that interactive sites, such as Facebook, were effective.

Less successful recruitment strategies mentioned by interviewees were so-called “passive” techniques, like posting volunteer opportunities in the organization’s newsletter, broadcasting PSAs on local television or radio stations, listing National Service positions at job work force centers, or placing fliers or announcements in newspapers. Organizations also listed volunteer openings on their websites, at times including a link to their Facebook page or to the CNCS website. A few organizations used the internet to send out emails “blasts” to their members (one had the American Legion send out the email), but most of these did not feel that this had been a very effective recruiting strategy.

In a few instances, National Service participants had a pre-existing relationship within an organization. In one case, a military-affiliated individual had been volunteering at his university to



help establish a student veterans' group when the institution was awarded a VISTA grant. He thus applied for, and was accepted into, the VISTA position, where he has since "stood up" the Student Veterans' Volunteer group on campus. Three other organizations reported filling their National Service slots in a similar manner.

The National Service stipend was reported by several interviewees as a barrier to recruiting VMF. Many of these young people had families to support, and thus were looking for full-time, well-paid employment in order to meet that obligation. Several interviewees said they were able to get veterans to look beyond the immediacy of the stipend amount and instead focus on the ways in which National Service could help them meet their employment goals: receiving basic assistance with resume writing, job interviewing techniques, and self-presentation; gaining new marketable skills; and establishing strong professional networks. Not every veteran applicant will be in a position to defer compensation, but those who are may find the long-term benefits of National Service attractive. Sponsoring organizations might review and promote the ways in which their programs or projects could provide such long-term benefits to their veteran National Service participants.

We did not find substantial differences in the recruiting strategies that were used by AmeriCorps, VISTA and Senior Corps programs. Two RSVP programs noted that they target their recruiting efforts to senior citizens' events and senior centers. In cases where grantees served as umbrellas, the local sites may serve as volunteer "clearinghouses" for their partner organizations or grantees. Ten organizations stated specifically that they use the CNCS e-Grants portal to find volunteers. Interviewees from some of these organizations mentioned that this recruitment strategy would be more effective if they were able to identify applicants who had military experience. They suggested that CNCS add a data field that applicants can mark to indicate relevant experience.

## **Promising Practice – Persistence**

**The Montana Conservation Corps** has successfully filled all 20 of their AmeriCorps member slots with veterans. This accomplishment was a challenge for the organization, but was achieved through concerted activities to establish connections with numerous veteran-oriented organizations and venues. Thus, in addition to conducting outreach with job service centers, the organization contacted the local Veterans' Employment representative, the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program representative; Veteran Certifying Officers at colleges; Veterans' Affairs centers and Veteran service centers; and Tribal veterans' representatives. In addition, they advertised the National Service opportunities through Craigslist and the Montana Conservation Corps website; created an electronic



flyer that was sent as a blast e-mail to veterans; and attended job fairs in various locations. In the future, they anticipate getting referrals from Veterans' Green Jobs. This grantee's experience suggests that successful recruitment of veterans into National Service positions may not be a "one and done" attempt, but rather requires significant outreach to and collaboration with a variety of community partners. In the future, this Corps hopes to capitalize on its newly formed relationships – as well as its ties with Veteran Green Jobs – to recruit with greater ease.

## **Training Civilians to Engage Military-Affiliated Individuals**

### **Overview**

Many organizations have filled their National Service slots with veterans or military families in an effort to leverage these shared military experiences into improved service outreach and engagement. Yet, as we saw earlier, not all interviewees reported success in recruiting this population. Nevertheless, they recognized that an understanding of military culture is critical to engage and appropriately serve the veterans' population. Although several organizations reported having strong training programs in place, the number of interviewees who described a continued need for relevant training suggests that this is an area in which CNCS could facilitate additional technical assistance.

### **Understanding Military Culture**

There are several facets of military culture that interviewees described as important for their civilian National Service participants and volunteers to understand. Those organizations that provide services to military families, including mentoring services to young people, commented on the importance of training their participants and volunteers in the fundamentals of military life. Such basics include learning about military hierarchy and the implications of the chain of command, knowing what resources are available on-base (e.g., MWR offices) for spouses of deployed service members, learning frequently used military acronyms or terms, and understanding the stresses associated with deployment and reintegration.

Interviewees also said that their volunteers need to be familiar with service beneficiaries' combat-related challenges, including PTSD and TBI. One interviewee said her employment training program was quite successful, but that she and her civilian VISTAs were not sufficiently prepared to handle

some of the PTSD-related behaviors of their veterans who had recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan. She believed additional training would ensure that her VISTAs have all the tools they need to contribute to an even more successful program.

Finally, numerous interviewees said their organizations aim to link veterans with available services and supports, or help veterans apply for any benefits for which they may be eligible. Because the military bureaucracy is so complicated, many said they train their volunteers on service-related benefits, eligibility criteria for various benefits, and what information needs to be obtained – and forms completed – to file a benefits claim. One interviewee said his organization, which had brought in several AmeriCorps members to help veterans access services and supports, was not successful in part because the members simply lacked the knowledge base to effectively link beneficiaries with available resources. Had a strong training program been in place prior to the members interacting with the veterans, perhaps his assessment of the program's effectiveness would have been more positive.

## Promising Practices – Training Strategies

While many grantees realized the importance of giving their civilian National Service participants and community volunteers additional information about the military, only a few organizations reported having strong training programs in place. Below we provide examples of three training approaches that may serve as possible models for CNCS to explore.

**Columbia County (Washington) RSVP Veterans' Program** – Columbia County, Washington is a rural community with approximately 49,000 residents, some 6,000 of whom are military veterans. Veterans in the county historically have been served by the Area Agency on Aging (AAA), whose Veterans' Service Office was staffed by one part-time person. Because of the great demand for assistance in the county, however, cases were getting backlogged and the Advisory Council of the AAA was hearing complaints from veterans that they were not being served. The RSVP Veterans' Program was begun in June, 2011 explicitly as an extension of the AAA program.

Ten RSVP volunteers handle the full array of tasks required to run the Office. In addition to administrative duties, such as filing, setting appointments, making callbacks and keeping records up-to-date, they also conduct basic intakes, provide benefits counseling, and assist the veterans in applying for benefits. For example, if a veteran comes into the office with a service-related hearing loss and needs a hearing aid, the volunteer will conduct the necessary research on when and where

the veteran served, obtain the required documentation, and start the claim for disability and compensation. Other services offered by the RSVP volunteers include making referrals to other service providers (e.g., emergency housing assistance for a homeless veteran), assisting with funerals, handing out medals to veterans for their service (the interviewee said, “WWII vets have medals coming, but they never asked for them.”), holding ceremonies to recognize veterans, and providing transportation to the VA hospital.

The interviewee noted that the lead volunteer, a lawyer, established a 200-page training manual on the services volunteers would be providing, paying particular attention to benefits and the claims filing processes. All of the RSVP volunteers received 20-25 hours of training prior to beginning their work, and reportedly continue to receive training on a monthly basis.

According to our interviewee, output data and client satisfaction surveys suggest the effectiveness of this approach: Within six months of the program’s beginning, appointments increased from two to five daily. Veterans also now experience dramatically reduced wait times for appointments, receive more one-on-one service, and report a higher rate of customer satisfaction than before the RSVP project was put into place.

Civilian VISTAs with the **Student Veterans of America**, through outreach to and communication with colleges and universities, have been instrumental in helping student veterans groups get started. The VISTAs initially focused their outreach efforts on cities and institutions with large veteran populations, but have since branched out to smaller locales. The interviewee noted that student veterans tend to come together anyway as a product of their military service and camaraderie; the VISTA simply serve as catalysts to formalize those relationships. The network has expanded such that there are now more than 550 chapters that cover all 50 states and three countries. The two current VISTAs, who have been at SVA for a little more than two months, reportedly have been able to sustain the efforts of their first-year counterparts with 80 percent of the chapters renewing their memberships. The interviewee reported that during an initial orientation, he provides the VISTAs with a training in military culture, which includes an orientation to SVA, a discussion of the history and implications of the GI Bill and the post-9/11 GI Bill, how to address challenges of visible and invisible wounds of returning service members, a primer on military rank structure, and training on the acronyms and phrases that are frequently used within the military. He also noted that some of the training occurs on the job, as he answers questions that arise for the VISTAs throughout their tenure. The success of these VISTAs hints at the effectiveness of both the training content and approach developed by this organization.

**RSVP of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania** offers veterans a wide array of support services, including a resource directory, job counseling, and peer-to-peer mentoring. To ensure their volunteers are well-prepared for their positions, RSVP provides an online “eLearning” program that offers 15-minute learning modules on PTSD, signs and symptoms of depression, and other topics. The modules were based on the grantee’s previous success with e-learning on other topics such as aging adult services, getting Head Start Parents to read to their kids, and the Pennsylvania voter ID laws. The interviewee felt very confident that the veteran-focused trainings would be helpful and could be used easily, and without any modifications, by other organizations that engage VMF. Further, because many non-profit agencies are low on funds and unable to attend in-person workshops, they believe this to be a very good alternative training strategy. The organization currently has very limited data on its program’s effectiveness, but has hired an outside consultant - the Philadelphia Foundation for Organizational Effectiveness – to review and strengthen their performance measures, including adding outcome measures. The program’s eLearning approach will merit additional consideration should the data reveal positive outcomes for service beneficiaries.

## **Assessment and Evaluation**

### **Overview**

There are several areas of program assessment that we explored in the interview protocol, including needs assessments, measures of program effectiveness, and conducting program evaluations. In general, interviewees reported being very limited in all three areas. While one might expect some financial limitations around conducting needs assessment or program evaluations, organizations were equally limited in the collection of outcome data, which is potentially a routine aspect of program implementation. Because current funding opportunities often are requiring organizations to demonstrate effectiveness through quantitative measures, this is one area in which grantees and sites could benefit from additional technical assistance from CNCS.

### **Needs Assessments**

A needs assessment is typically designed to collect information from members of a target group or community on what they see as the important service gaps in the community. This information is then used to guide future service delivery. Almost a quarter of the organizations interviewed for this

study reported that in order to determine what services were of greatest need to the local VMF population they had conducted some form of a local needs assessment. Half of the organizations said that their needs assessments had been done in an informal manner, often through conversations with affiliate programs, or by bringing together groups of community members (civilians, veterans, and service providers) to discuss available resources and the outstanding needs. The other organizations reported having more formal assessment processes. In a couple of instances, interviewees said their sponsored conferences or “summits,” bringing together all of the veterans’ service providers in the community to create a strategic plan for serving veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. In one case, the program director of a Community Action Agency reviewed reports on the community population and statistics, conducted a community survey, and called local service offices and hospitals to find out both the type and volume of local needs. Services offered in response to these findings included transportation to medical appointments and activities with older veterans that would allow them to continue to live independently (e.g., grocery shopping, house cleaning, bill paying).

### ***Promising Practice – Conducting a Needs Assessment***

Colorado-based **Veterans Helping Veterans Now (VHVnow)** is one of the organizations that reported having conducted a needs assessment that they believe to be replicable. The interviewee said the organization was the brainchild of one individual, a former Vietnam combat Marine who was interested in working with a young Iraqi war veteran who had been jailed on his second DUI charge. The jail administrators would not let the Marine in to speak with the young veteran outside of normal visiting hours unless the visitor was a member of the clergy or part of a larger organization. The former Marine, frustrated by the bureaucratic roadblock to an offer of support, decided to start his own organization. This organization eventually became Veterans Helping Veterans Now. The interviewee said that as early as March 2007, a panel of 21 community members – including veterans, military family members, non-profit providers, a local attorney, and community members – began convening monthly to identify unmet needs of veterans in Boulder County. Their goal was to see what services were already available so they could make appropriate referrals; and they wanted to figure out what services and supports would help meet the unmet needs identified by the community members. She reported that they began with a \$5,000 grant from the Rose Community Foundation and, in 2009, received funding through a fiscal sponsor (a direct CNCS grantee) who arranged for this program and other nonprofits to benefit from VISTAs.

Specific services offered through VHVnow include “warm referrals” (staff asks veterans about their experiences with services offered in the County and refer veterans, as appropriate, to those services that receive positive reports), peer supports, education to communities and family members about veterans’ issues, such as PTSD, and planned programs designed to meet the support needs of the veterans’ population (e.g., substance abuse treatment groups, therapeutic massage, acupuncture, mindfulness training, creative writing). VHVnow also has a community space designated as a “clubhouse” where veterans can gather for conversation, coffee, and mutual support. Although the interviewee had only output data, she reported a 30 percent growth in the organization’s funds over the past year, suggesting that local businesses and residents believe the program to be addressing a critical need within the community.

The interviewee believed that the program’s needs assessment was an important contributor to their success and argued that their approach could be replicated anywhere. She said there are **three critical players** who must be included in the development the program:

- Someone who is a veteran;
- Someone who is tied to the local community; and
- Someone with some sort of agency or non-profit experience.

An important aspect of developing the program, she said, is that those three people have to spend time getting input from the community and finding out the needs of the community. Then they have to meet those needs such that services are not duplicated, and that the gaps are filled in with the available resources in the community. In a small rural area, there might be a church that could give up rooms during the week for meetings; or maybe the program could connect with a mental health center in the county if there are no other available services. The specifics of the program will look different between a rural community and a large metropolitan area, she said, but the process of filling in the gaps should be the same, i.e., make the most of the resources that are available. The interviewee added that it is vital that the program involve veterans in the program planning. This will ensure that local veterans identify their own needs and thereby buy into the supports that the program offers.

## Measuring Program Effectiveness

We asked grantees and sites about the data that they have collected on their programs’ effectiveness in meeting the needs of VMF through National Service. Even though roughly half of the

organizations have been working with military-affiliated individuals since before 2009, many are just now recognizing that if they are to continue attracting grants targeting VMF, they must track their work with this population. At the time of the interviews, fewer than half of the organizations participating in this study reported collecting output data related to their VMF activities, although frequently those data could not be isolated from the rest of their activities. A handful indicated that they collect outcome data on their service recipients, National Service participants, or community volunteers. No organizations reported having data that demonstrated the impact of their program by comparing the outcomes of participants or beneficiaries with what happens in the absence of their program. Indeed, many organizations reportedly have only anecdotal information to support their claims of program effectiveness. In most cases, such information was obtained primarily through feedback from volunteers and beneficiaries. Stakeholders, such as parents and other family members or advisory boards, might also provide feedback about program effectiveness. Anecdotal evidence is easy and inexpensive to collect and it does frequently provide valuable just-in-time feedback on program activities. It should be noted that many of the programs reporting only anecdotal data have just initiated their programs; more comprehensive measurement tools may be adopted as these programs mature over time. However, the general lack of systematic data collection to track and measure program effectiveness indicates a need for greater guidance and tools that would help organizations to implement data collection systems.

## **Outputs**

All of the 36 AmeriCorps programs in our sample (6 of these organizations also have VISTA grants) said they collect output data, but in only half of these were veteran-specific outputs being collected. Similarly, although all 37 VISTA projects in our sample mentioned collecting some output data, only about one quarter had outputs specifically identifying veterans; and half of the 20 RSVP programs reported collecting veterans' outputs. Selected examples of outputs include: the number of houses built or renovated for veterans or their families, number of calls made to veterans or their families, number of cases referred for services, number of volunteer hours used, and the number of children tutored.

Organizations also varied greatly in the amount of time, effort and diligence they invested in collecting such data. In the majority of cases, just one or two quantitative measures are collected regularly and are supplemented with in-person anecdotal feedback from National Service members and other stakeholders. Interviewees from various VISTA projects and AmeriCorps programs reported that their VISTAs or members submit reports with, for example, the number of veterans



they served, but these data are rounded out with written narratives on the National Service participants' perceived accomplishments. Other organizations have standard forms that their volunteers fill out weekly or monthly providing some qualitative and/or quantitative information on their activities. In some cases, these forms are compiled and entered in a database, but ordinarily they are just reviewed individually and in a qualitative fashion.

## **Outcomes**

We encountered a few organizations in our interviews that reported that they are measuring outcomes of their work in the VMF sphere. For example, one employment-oriented program collects information on the number of veteran service recipients who obtain jobs. The interviewee reported that they plan to expand their collection of outcomes in the not-too-distant future, focusing in particular on veterans' employment status 180 days after completing the training program. A second organization that provides employment and training services to veterans measures several aspects of their program, including the collection of performance data on team-building and technical skill gains. The interviewee said that they administer a survey to veteran AmeriCorps members at baseline to assess their skills in key areas, and a second survey once their service is completed that includes a reassessment of their skills. A third example comes from a school district that is supported by both VISTAs and AmeriCorps members. Test score data are carefully tracked to help monitor the educational improvements of students tutored and mentored by National Service participants. A fourth program, a national organization that was just beginning its National Service program in November, 2012, indicated that they are planning to measure two outcomes for VMF service recipients: knowledge gained by participants in the organization's VMF employment program; and the effects of their program on veterans' community reintegration. While the first instrument holds promise for other organizations that are seeking to validate the success of their employment programs, the reintegration measure, when fully developed, may be of broad interest to other CNCS grantees.

### ***Promising Practice – Tracking the Effectiveness of National Service Participants***

As we have seen, organizations in the study engage veterans and military families across an array of service areas, from building organizational capacity to referring veterans to needed services and supports. While there is thus no single measure of the effectiveness of National Service, some approaches have been developed that merit additional attention. The Virginia Department of Health



Services, for example, has developed a unique approach to track the activities of their AmeriCorps members affiliated with their Wounded Warrior program. In this one-year old program, members are placed in service organizations in the community as “navigators,” conducting outreach to veterans and military family members and engaging in case management. The role of the AmeriCorps navigators is to help these individuals figure out which services are best suited to meet their needs, and then refer the veteran or family member to resource specialists with the Wounded Warriors program. Resource specialists then determine eligibility for available programs and make further referrals, as needed.

All navigators carry business cards with them that have their unique code along with the phone numbers for all of the resource specialists. When a member makes a referral, s/he gives the veteran one of the business cards. When veterans or family members contact one of the resource specialists, the specialist asks them for the member’s code on the business card. This helps the department track where referrals are coming from and helps to gauge which AmeriCorps members are most successful in getting veterans to follow-through on referrals.

We have noted that there are numerous organizations in this study whose National Service participants or community volunteers endeavor to link veterans or military family members with community services or supports. Adopting a similar approach might allow these organizations to identify which individuals are most successfully engaging the population, and to learn which engagement strategies are proving to be most effective. It is important to note, however, that this strategy is still one remove from measuring program effectiveness; it does not, for example, indicate what proportion of a member’s referrals were followed through by the veterans, nor, once connected, whether the veteran actually accepted those services and if the services promoted a positive outcome. Different measures would need to be developed to truly assess program effectiveness and impact.

## Program Evaluations

Program evaluation is a systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and using information to answer questions about the effectiveness of programs and policies. Stakeholders, such as CNCS and others, want to know if the programs they are funding or supporting in other ways are actually having the intended effect. Equally important are questions such as how the program could be improved, whether the program is worthwhile, whether there are better alternatives, if there are *unintended* outcomes, and whether the program goals are appropriate and useful. For evaluations to

contribute to quality improvement, data must be collected from all stakeholders, on all types of program activities, and in frequent intervals. Optimally, programs will also conduct *impact* evaluations, which assess the outcomes of program participants against those of a comparison group. Such an evaluation design offers the strongest evidence for program effectiveness and ultimately is the benchmark CNCS would like to set for all of its grantees.

The majority of interviewees reported that their organizations have never conducted a formal evaluation. This is not surprising; over half of all CNCS funded programs included in this study just began serving veterans in the last one to three years. A few of our respondents also cited prohibitive costs as the primary reason why a formal evaluation of their programs has not been conducted. Many interviewees also were not familiar with the term ‘evaluation’ as used in social and policy science. Several suggested that they had conducted an ‘evaluation,’ but then described monitoring visits by the State Commission or CNCS, or reports they had produced on their performance measures. While such activities do provide opportunities for monitoring and quality improvement, they do not constitute the type of program evaluation typically required to demonstrate program effectiveness and impact.

Only about one in five interviewees (22 in total, 15 of which began working with National Service prior to 2009) said that some type of evaluation of their program – by an external or internal party - has been conducted. But even in those cases the evaluation did not include the impact of National Service nor was it focused on services to VMF (unless VMF are the only population the organization serves). Many respondents did indicate that future evaluations would track impacts on veteran and military National Service participants and impacts on veteran service beneficiaries separately.

Sixteen of the grantees and sites we interviewed, 13 of which were AmeriCorps programs, contracted with external parties that conducted independent evaluations on their programs. For example, the Texas A&M Program, AgriLife, conducted an evaluation of four of the Conservation Corps programs in our sample. The evaluation’s main component was a survey administered to program participants asking them to describe and rate their Conservation Corps experience across a variety of dimensions. Seven grantees and sites (four of which were RSVP programs) conducted evaluations using their own resources, peer organizations in their community, or the help of advisory councils. Most of these evaluations consisted of obtaining input from their volunteers on their program experiences, collecting program outputs, or identifying program needs. Such evaluation results are used to set new targets and substantiate applications for additional funding. Rarely,

however, did interviewees indicate that stakeholder input, i.e., feedback from service beneficiaries, had been obtained.

## Noteworthy Programs

The initiative to engage veterans and military families in National Service is a relatively new undertaking by CNCS. We interviewed representatives from numerous organizations that had begun their veterans' programs only within the last six months to one year, and thus found it too early to assess their programs' effectiveness and impacts. In addition, many organizations are serving veterans and their families for the first time and thus are adjusting their service approaches as they mature and learn. Although few organizations were able to support their claims of effectiveness with defensible quantitative data, interviewees described several programs and projects whose accomplishments caught our attention. While it is perhaps premature to call the following "promising programs," we do think they are "noteworthy programs" that merit further examination by CNCS. In the following pages we describe four such programs: two VISTA projects, one AmeriCorps program, and one RSVP program. These were not the only programs that stood out to the study team, however. There were quite a few CNCS-supported veterans' efforts that caught our attention, either in whole or in part, and that merit further examination for strategies that may benefit others seeking to meet the needs of veterans and their families through National Service. Many of these organizations are called out in the "learning document" that is a companion to this report.

**Metropolitan Community College, Omaha, Nebraska.** The main focus of the program is to provide support to current military service members, veterans, and their families with the transition from military to college life and to make them aware of the college and community resources available to them. The VISTAs looked at about 400 educational institutions, many of which had characteristics similar to MCC, such as multiple campuses and a focus on vocational training. They ultimately narrowed the list down to 40-50 to help them model their program. They looked more closely at schools like Tidewater College, Eastern Kentucky, University of Arizona and some of the local schools and tried to take what they considered the best features from each of them, but not modeling themselves after one specific program. They focused on schools that had similar characteristics such as multiple campuses and focused on vocational training.

The VISTAs have a long list of accomplishments. First, they have been at the forefront of providing student veterans with relevant, easy-to-access information, such as campus resource guide for student veterans ([http://www.mccneb.edu/mvss/documents/MVSSResourceGuide\\_000.pdf](http://www.mccneb.edu/mvss/documents/MVSSResourceGuide_000.pdf)). The guide, which is an easily printed pdf format, is located on the MCC website and provides the reader with an array of valuable information, such as contact information for those staff who advise military students; at what office they can apply for veteran educational benefits; contact information for the Office of Military and Veteran Support Services, and where to obtain specific information about the College. They are currently working on a similar community resource guide that will be available on paper and online. In addition to the guide, the VISTAs built a website which was described by the interviewee as a “one stop shop” for the veteran student (<http://www.mccneb.edu/mvss/>). Information on this site includes links to a new military student checklist, veterans’ financial services, and a list of those faculty and staff who are military-affiliated and can be contacted by military students for advice and mentoring.

VISTAs have also done significant outreach on campus to ensure that MCC is well-prepared to support its veteran students. For example, they have supported a training to faculty of MCC to raise awareness of military culture and the specific needs of the Veteran student, like what may trigger PTSD. Counselors and advisors also have been trained on PTSD and TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury) so they can better serve military students.

MCC VISTA project staff are also playing a significant role in partnering with community organizations. They represent the college at the Nebraska Brain Injury Association (BIA), which has a Veterans’ Taskforce. They also serve as MCC representatives on the Inter-Service Family Assistance Committee (ISFAC ). The BIA and ISFAC reportedly are their two main community connections, but the VISTAs also have developed a working relationship with the local veterans’ center.

Other significant accomplishments by these National Service participants include chartering a chapter of the Student Veterans’ of America on campus; supporting a job readiness event where they did resume critiques and helped veterans translate military terms on their resumes into civilian language; fostering special recognition at graduation for student veterans, which included a standing ovation for veterans at the graduation ceremony and, going forward, will include a mention of their military service in the graduation program and the wearing of red, white, and blue honor cords.

We selected MCC’s VISTA project as a noteworthy program because the above descriptions are just *some* of the VISTAs accomplishments for this one educational institution. Who are these VISTAs

who have been able to be so productive? What characteristics do they share? And what are the institutional characteristics that have allowed them to accomplish so much in such a short period of time? We believe a case study of this program might provide insights into promising practices that could be used by other National Service programs and projects that are affiliated with institutions of higher education.

***Vet Connect - Olympic Community Action Program, Clallam-Jefferson County RSVP (Washington State).*** Olympic Community Action Programs (OlyCAP) recognizes itself as “the community’s helping hand” and is a non-profit human services organization offering programs to low income, at-risk, and special needs populations. OlyCAP has sponsored the Clallam-Jefferson County RSVP program since 1972, although veterans are new focus area for them. The veterans focus began after the interviewee attended a spring RSVP Directors’ Meeting in Olympia, where a veterans’ representative from the Department of Labor spoke about a national outreach program for rural veterans called Vet Connect. The program involves making phone calls to veterans to determine how the veterans are doing and what services they need (primary needs identified thus far have been employment, housing, and medical care). The program is not a direct services activity, but a service linkage approach. The representative encouraged the RSVP program to get involved in Vet Connect since they have extensive connections through a very rural area.

The interviewee said his organization does not recruit specifically for veterans or military family members, but has placed newspaper ads talking about how they are looking for people who want to work with veterans. He reported that about half of his RSVP volunteers are veterans. These volunteers help host Stand Downs, a resource day for veterans where they can get limited services (such as blood pressure screenings) and connect with resources in the community. The volunteers contact all veterans who have contacted the state job search resource, WorkSource. After an initial call, members determine VMFs’ needs and refer them out to services and other resources as needed. Veterans also can come to RSVP volunteers to get referrals for services or specific resources, such as counseling, food, medical care, and assistance with filing benefits claims (OlyCAP does have a housing program, so veterans may be served directly through this program).

Although the program currently has only output data, the interviewee felt like their model of acting as a service “clearinghouse” was a promising practice. They have been contacted by an RSVP program in Montana to see if Clallam-Jefferson County RSVP would help them form a similar program. Additionally, all 18 RSVP programs in the state of Washington have adopted Vet Connect as their outreach mechanism to this population. Vet Connect was selected as an “interesting program” because of two important features: First, veterans, who may be reluctant to seek

assistance, are not required to initiate contact with service providers; instead, the contact is initiated by the RSVP volunteers. This proactive approach may be critical for some veterans who would otherwise not make their needs known. Secondly, the use of a tried-and-true technology (telephone) is invaluable in connecting rural, potentially isolated veterans with service and supports. The veterans may lack the transportation to get to the needed service agencies, but such agencies are often able to reach out to isolated members of the community. Finally, from a program assessment perspective, the fact that veterans in this program are contacted through an initial list creates numerous opportunities for followup service calls as well as tracking and evaluation activities. This organization is already planning a mail survey to service beneficiaries so that beneficiaries can evaluate the service they receive. The Vet Connect model thus could prove exportable to other rural or frontier communities around the country.

**Idaho Department of Labor - Veterans Serving Veterans AmeriCorps Program.** In 2009, the Idaho Department of Labor held a training for its 11 full-time state Veteran Representatives and had them complete a survey about how the Department could better serve them, including asking the Representatives what they needed in their local offices. According to the study interviewees, “the overwhelming response was that they needed more boots on the ground” to help serve the local veterans’ community. Serve Idaho, working through the Department of Labor, brought in AmeriCorps members to several of the local offices to provide support to the Veterans’ Representatives. At the time of the interviews, all 9 of this year’s AmeriCorps members were themselves military veterans.

The most effective service provided by the National Service participants reportedly is their outreach strategy of “triaging” veterans as they come into the lobbies of the local Department of Labor offices. AmeriCorps members engage with the veterans who need minimal assistance, such as with writing a resume or locating available resources. This frees up the Veterans’ Representatives to focus on more involved cases, such as providing employment assistance for veterans with disabilities. The members themselves also have benefitted from their service with the Department, as five of the 18 (total) AmeriCorps members have gone on to obtain good jobs either with the State (such as in the Department of Labor) or with veterans-serving organizations.

This program is a nice example of how AmeriCorps members can successfully augment state resources and services. At any given time, the Idaho Department of Labor has between 25,000 and 30,000 veteran cases in their database. With the AmeriCorps members providing assistance to those veterans whose service needs are not as intense, the Representatives are better-positioned to meet their objectives of helping all veterans obtain employment.

**California Conservation Corps.** During this study, Westat staff interviewed over 40 organizations whose National Service programs provide employment support and training to veterans. Many of them indicated that they have been quite successful in their efforts through the use of a peer support model. Military-affiliated National Service participants have been able to engage with service recipients, provide returning veterans with job skills training, and help link veterans to employment resources, such as companies that are interested in giving hiring preferences to veterans. Although the value of peer supports cannot be overstated, we did interview individuals from a handful of organizations whose National Service participants were civilians, but who reportedly were having tremendous success working with the veterans' population. The California Conservation Corps, which has a civilian VISTA-supported employment and training program for veterans, is one such example.

The California Conservation Corps has thirteen crews around the state, five of which are veterans-only units. Corps members, none of whom is a National Service participant, work eight hours a day and receive minimum wage. During their work, they also receive job training in such service areas land maintenance, brush clearing, firefighting, home/business energy assessments, and fisheries management. In addition, each of these five sites is assigned a VISTA who teaches employment classes, does resume-building with the veterans, and trains them in interviewing techniques and self-presentation. All VISTAs were described by the interviewee as "smart, motivated, and compassionate" and well-trained in veteran's issues; none, however, is a veteran or military family member.

Given other interviewees' emphasis on the peer model, how does this approach work so well? The interviewee pointed to two critical components. First, the VISTAs offer one-on-one attention to the veterans, and thus know their strengths and challenges, what services they need, and what jobs coming up are best suited to each veteran's strengths. It is this individualized attention, whether from a civilian or a veteran, which she believed to be important. Secondly, and consistent with the peer support model, the job developer who is based at the California Conservation Corps headquarters is a veteran from Veterans' Green Jobs. Not only is he affiliated with a very successful national veterans' employment program, but he also has those all-important ties with other veterans' organizations as well as other Conservation Corps programs around the country. The job developer thus brings those veterans' connections into the program, and works closely with the VISTAs to determine which veterans might be best suited for positions that become available.



The interviewee believed this to be an optimal pairing of civilian and military supports for the veterans Corps members: they receive excellent support from dedicated VISTAs yet still have a close connection with the veterans' community. She also believed this to be a great arrangement for the VISTAs, who are reminded that they and the veterans are there to help each other, i.e., they help the veterans get jobs, and the veterans help these young civilians understand what they've been through.

We selected this as a noteworthy program for several reasons, not least of which is the success these civilians reportedly are having with the veteran's population. But we were also taken by the program's multi-pronged design to support veterans' community reintegration. First, the veterans are gaining skills and experience that may make them eligible for green jobs as those jobs become available. Secondly, they are working in an arena (conservation) that aligns with the much-discussed military value of caring for others. Whether fighting forest fires or helping a business or home owner cut down on energy costs, these individuals are contributing to a healthier planet. Third, and rarely mentioned by other interviewees, this program director has deliberately sought to create an environment in which these civilians can gain a better understanding of the veterans' experiences. Successful reintegration requires work not only on the part of our veterans, but also community members, who will be more welcoming if they have compassion for the veterans' experiences. We believe this deliberate effort to create such a learning environment to be an approach worthy of replication.



## Summary and Next Steps

This report has provided the reader with the first comprehensive look at how National Service is meeting the needs of veterans and military family members. Grantees and local organizations are implementing a wide range of activities in an effort to serve this population, from offering direct services that are in high demand (e.g., providing employment training or benefits counseling) to supporting community-wide efforts to coordinate service delivery to veterans (e.g., creating Regional Work Groups or developing local resource guides). Many organizations are recruiting veterans into their National Service positions in a concerted effort to improve their outreach to the target population; but many organizations that, to date, have recruited only civilians have found other ways to connect with local veterans (e.g., through organizational connections) in order to extend their service reach and effectiveness. Importantly, *all* of the Issue Areas identified by the Serve America Act are being addressed by one or more of the organizations included in this study.

Despite their dedication to veterans, these organizations have faced – and still face – numerous challenges to achieving their objectives. For example, because of the implicit trust that reportedly exists between military-affiliated individuals, civilian organizations have had difficulty recruiting VMF into National Service positions or as community volunteers. Many have established linkages with local veterans’ organizations, but some noted that they have had difficulty convincing such organizations of their legitimacy. They have asked CNCS for assistance in making these community connections and in determining other effective ways to reach the population.

In a related matter, the civilians who are supporting these organizations’ efforts often know very little about military culture or the bureaucratic maze that must be negotiated if a veteran wants to apply for benefits or compensation. Interviewees recognized the need for additional training of their AmeriCorps members, VISTAs, and volunteers, and asked if CNCS could provide them with relevant materials or curricula. We identified several grantees who have developed fairly extensive training programs for their National Service participants and community volunteers, and recommend CNCS contact these organizations for ideas on creating the content of and implementing a “military training” program.

Numerous interviewees said they wanted to engage with other veterans’ serving National Service programs to learn what others are doing to effectively meet the needs of this population. Although a couple said they wanted to visit with other organizations to learn about different approaches first hand, they also expressed excitement about the potential for information sharing through the virtual

Knowledge Network. We recommend that CNCS monitor the interactions within the Network to ensure that this format is meeting grantees' information needs.

One of the objectives of this study was to identify best practices – or at least promising practices – for engaging veterans and military families through National Service. Yet although nearly everyone we talked to said that his/her organization's efforts to serve the military population have been effective, few had collected sufficient data to back up these claims. A handful of organizations were able to describe outcome measures they were using, but the vast majority of interviewees based their claims on anecdotal data only. As this program area matures, we recommend CNCS encourage grantees to implement data collection tools that can truly demonstrate the impact of their programs. In the absence of such data, it is impossible for CNCS to determine which strategies or activities are having the greatest effect in meeting the needs of this population. Because many interviewees mentioned the paucity of available funding or having limited personnel resources, we remind CNCS that any data collection instruments must be both cost- and time-efficient to implement.

Finally, we remind CNCS that this report represents only the first exploration of what grantees are doing to meet the Serve America Act requirements and address the emerging needs of veterans and military families. In most respects, this report only provides a broad description of the current state of the Veterans' Service Corps, not an in-depth analysis of the most service effective approaches. Nevertheless, we have included descriptions of several programs that we believe to be engaging in exciting work that may well prove to be effective. We are also hopeful that some of the practices described in this report are transferrable to other organizations that are looking for ways to better serve the military population. We recommend that CNCS explore these, and possibly a few other, programs in more depth in an effort to better understand a) if these programs truly are positively affecting veterans and their families and, as importantly, b) how they are accomplishing this. Case studies that include a process evaluation component would likely be an excellent next step to understanding these programs.